



## Chris Marker: The SLON Films

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# Chris Marker: The SLON Films

The mere mention of political film-making in France after the turmoil of May 1968 is synonymous for most Americans with the name of Jean-Luc Godard and the now-defunct Dziga-Vertov Group which he spearheaded with Jean-Pierre Gorin.<sup>1</sup> Few people know that French collective-film-making derives from Chris Marker, who formed a film co-operative SLON (Société pour le Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles) to make *Loin du Vietnam* (*Far From Vietnam*, 1967). The film was a protest against continued American involvement in Vietnam and embodied segments by various film-makers whom Marker had gathered together for the project: Godard, Alain Resnais, Claude Lelouch, Agnes Varda, Joris Ivens and William Klein. It took someone of Marker's incredible persuasiveness to bring these artists together and fuse their work into one coherent statement. And Marker's presence literally "sandwiched" the various segments of the other film-makers: he was both producer and editor, and thus responsible for both pre- and post-production.

After the events of May 1968, during which Marker and Godard both made numerous *ciné-tracts*,<sup>2</sup> Marker revived the SLON group and committed himself totally to collective film-making. Mediating between film technicians and factory workers, he took film's technology and process out of the studios and movie theaters, allowing the workers to make films about themselves, study the films and form ongoing collectives around such films. In this way Chris Marker, while shrouding himself in an enigmatic obscurity, has given birth to most of the leading political film collectives still operating in France.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time that he was transforming political film activity in France itself, Marker and the SLON group (Valérie Mayoux, Jean-Claude Lerner, Alain Adair, John Tooker and others) remained very active abroad, making

three films of note after *Far From Vietnam: La Sixième Face du Pentagone* (Marker and François Reichenbach, 1968), about the peace march on Washington; *La Bataille des dix millions* (*The Battle of the 10,000,000*—Marker and Mayoux, 1970), about a failure in the Cuban sugar crop; and *Le Train en marche* (*The Train Rolls on*—Marker, 1971), a combination of archive footage about the Russian agit-prop trains of the twenties and an interview with the Soviet film-maker most responsible for many of the films made on those trains, Alexander Medvedkin. This latter film was the result of meetings in Paris between Medvedkin and Marker in 1971, and it served as a kind of prologue to the re-release of Medvedkin's first feature-length film *Schastye* (*Happiness*, 1934).<sup>4</sup>

Significantly, all three SLON films correspond in interesting ways to three earlier Marker films about the same locales: *Lettre de Sibérie* (*Letter From Siberia*, 1957), a biting satire-travelogue about the Soviet Union; "L'Amérique rêve" ("The American Dream," 1959), a scenario never filmed about America; and *Cuba Si* (*Cuba Yes*, 1961), a compilation film with numerous still photographs of Cuba under the Castro regime in its early stages. There is a great deal to be learned about the political evolution of one of the most formative cinematic minds of our time in comparing Marker's America then and now, his Russia then and now, his Cuba then and now, both in terms of subject and film form. This comparison is the subject of my study.

An inveterate traveler, Marker launched in the early fifties a reasonably priced, although lushly illustrated, series of books collectively entitled "Petit Planète," with each book in the series giving a subjective, personal and sometimes poetic impression of a foreign country, but backed up by facts and figures to support such an impression. The idea for, and implementation

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of, the series predates any of Marker's documentary films. The point here is that "Petit Planète" as a metaphor informs all of his film work: the foreign country viewed in images of eccentricity and contradiction, viewed primarily for a spectator who has never been there (thus, the *image-témoin* or "eye-witness" format), and commented upon by a subjective text which replaces the usual "dead" language of most guide-books and internally sponsored documentaries. In fact, as André Bazin noted, Chris Marker is primarily a writer, a creative writer making films: "Chris Marker is of the new generation of writers who think that the time of the image has come but who don't say that it's necessary to sacrifice to the image the power and virtue of a language which remains the special interpreter of the mind, the intelligence. What this means is that for Chris Marker the commentary of a film isn't what is added to images that have already been pre-arranged and fixed, but rather it's almost the first and foremost element . . ."<sup>5</sup>

It was in *Letter From Siberia* that Marker first demonstrated his idiosyncratic eye and acerbic wit in the merger of found footage and invented text. Siberia is, of course, that part of the Soviet Union which for Marker embodies the past, the folklore and mythology absent in modernization, the eccentricities and contradictions that are missing in Moscow. Marker begins with a Yakut legend as a basis for attacking the "super-powers" through wit rather than polemics:

The Siberian proverb states that the devil created the forest. The devil makes things well. His forest in its entirety is as big as the United States. Of course, it's also true that he may have created the United States.

Later in the film, Marker confesses to having juxtaposed shots of Russian fire-planes with shots of fires blazing in Montana. His political comment on his own falsification through editing, which demystifies the whole notion of "documentary reality," is the following:

Being a little bit short on footage and thinking that all forest fires are pretty much alike, I didn't think I was betraying documentary reality by inserting a few frames furnished by Pathé-Journal Newsreel. But since these frames are of Montana, maybe I should point out that



FAR FROM VIETNAM

this is the first film ever made to show, as a foreshadowing of co-existence, Russian fire-planes putting out an American fire.

Thus, Marker pokes fun simultaneously at power politics and the documentary form. At one point in the film he cuts away from a tongue-in-cheek dissertation on reindeer, based loosely on scientific and consensus fact, to a mock television commercial which carries the reindeer's utilitarian value to the absurd, including showing Alfred E. Newman of *Mad Magazine* fame eating Reindeer Flakes for breakfast. At another point, he contrives to create an "imaginary" documentary that begins with a look-alike of Nanook of the North and ends with Sputnik. The images, thus, contradict each other, from Siberia's own flat landscapes to Marker's invented fantasies. Yet both kinds of images, mediated by the ironic edge of the spoken text, comment on the same things: ridiculing the technological advances of Siberia, lamenting the loss of poetry and folklore to apparent social progress, mourning the loss of individuality that in Marker's vision is aligned with the past and pre-political.

Never filmed, "L'Amérique rêve" remains a photo-essay, a superimposition of wry commentary on still photographs. But the characteristic traits of *Letter From Siberia* are all there in an even more abrupt and transparent state, since the editing process of film is missing. Marker uses the format of a television commercial, itself speeded-up and scattershot, to suggest the bubble of the American Dream: "The American Dream, everything you've seen in this film, it's a dream. A good American dream: wash-and-wear, unbreakable, with a one-year guarantee."

The underlying assumption of the travelogue is that the spectator will not have seen the country first-hand. And for Marker, the travelogue functions to unearth the invisible from the visible: the lack of a culture in America, characterized by a decline in the arts and a rise in technology; the commercialized "dream" that can be bought and sold, because America never had a past; colonialism (a form of consumerism) with its concomitant offspring, cultural stupidity. Marker juxtaposes photographs of the "old" West (hills, forests, desert) with those of the New West (cars, skyscrapers, urban sprawl). His commentary suggests that the expropriation of the lands of the Indians was paid for with the sacrifice of a cultural memory: "The territorial conquest brought into opposition the Indians with the newly-arrived Europeans. In the process the Indians lost their lives, and the Europeans their memory."

If the price for colonializing America was the sacrifice of a cultural memory that formerly linked America with Europe, then a further consequence of that amnesia is the isolationism of America, expressed by Marker through the metaphor of photography. Americans do not trust what they see, unless it can be replicated by Kodak. The rise in technology has created the mechanistic and mannered way in which Americans travel and view the rest of the world.

No country is completely real, no moment is really lived as long as the photographic image is not fixed. And for many Americans, reality is only an inner room of photography. So don't be surprised to see them running around the world without seeing it, using their Kodaks like a Colt .45 to cover their retreat. And once back in their armchairs, in the presence of a photo album or a slide projector, they will relax, they will begin to love the world, they will begin to travel.

Marker personifies the natural world and all objects, including billboards, comic strips and photographs, while dehumanizing the human beings, showing them as objects trapped in their own landscape. Marker "visits" Ghost Town in Hollywood to show that Americans revere what is dead or immobilized (like the Kodak pictures), at the same time that they become the inhabitants of Ghost Town by visiting it.

Marker's method seems clear enough. Either he picks famous landmarks like Ghost Town or

Disneyland and then superimposes his own ironic point of view in the text or else he picks "oddities" and curiosas, like the Siamese-twins' contest or the prison-farm rodeo, letting the eccentricity speak for itself. The "topics" covered by Marker's travelogue, thus, include the following:

- San Francisco (with quotes from Jean Cocteau)
- Cults of youth in America
- Contrasts between art and advertising
- Ghost Town and Disneyland
- Huntsville prison farm and its rodeo
- The role of eating in America
- The psychology of parents in bringing up children
- The importance of newspapers in America
- Auto-racing (with stills from racing films and comments on method acting)
- Husband-catching by women (with stills from a Miss America contest)
- Discussion of Americans as being cats or dogs, with quotes from Cocteau
- Mardi Gras in New Orleans with a discussion of the use of masks (juxtaposed with images from a police line-up)
- The Holy Rollers and how emotions are channeled in America
- The phenomenon of gambling in Las Vegas
- Skyscrapers in Chicago and New York

We are pretty far removed from the "serious" testament of a de Tocqueville here. Marker has weaned the travelogue format from a fawning, sometimes mawkish appraisal of democracy to the raw food of alienating and uncontrollable technology, with its newness and sameness, and the idiot trivia of a Charles Kuralt on the road, seeking pockets of the rural past and exotica that test the sameness of the buildings and the photographs through "deviations" in human personality. The point to be made here is that Marker's text controls the entire project. Run silently, his early documentaries are an interesting, but random babble.

Differences in his emerging style were clearly due to differences in subject. When he dealt with a super-power (Russia in *Lettre de Sibérie*, China in *Dimanche à Pékin* (1955), America in "*L'Amérique rêve*"), he fragmented what he saw into bizarre bifurcations, concentrating on colonialism, lack of culture, eccentricities and stupidities.

By contrast, when he dealt with an emerging nation—the Israel of *Description d'un combat* (1960), the Cuba of *Cuba Sí* (1961), the Mexico of “Soy Mexico” (1965)<sup>6</sup>—he chose to stress the authenticity of the people within their struggle, emphasizing their dignity and their grandeur. In the embryonic beginnings of a *cinéma vérité* for which Marker would become famous in *Le Joli Mai* (1963–65),<sup>7</sup> he allowed the people of the country visited to move about more. With less selective posing, Marker's camera assumes the stance of privileged observer. The images strive for candor. The text, in turn, becomes more “educational,” because it intends to trace a history rather than a fantasy.

*Cuba Sí* is perhaps Marker's most successful juxtaposition of candid-camera images with a poetic, admiring text in this period. Because the Bay of Pigs invasion took place while Marker was editing the film, he “revised” his text for the first half of the film to include an especially strong anti-American stance. Marker listed a litany of nationalized industries, in order to show that a more authentic Cuba had been born; on the other hand, he noted that there was a recourse to mythology abroad to explain the nationalizations, as though Fidel Castro were some kind of simpleton, a naive and perhaps noble-hearted caricature: “But for the rest of the world, and especially for the Americans, it was easier to revive the myths. Fidel Castro, he was Robin Hood.”

Breaking with his earlier filtering of the foreign country entirely through the “eye-witness” of the falsifying narrative text, Marker divided *Cuba Sí* structurally into two parts: his Cuba and Castro's Cuba. The first half of the film belongs to Marker's vision and consists of his ironic observations or poetic recitations on the new Cuba. This section includes musical notations like “scherzo” and “andante” for the recitation of the text. And this section ends on a litany that places Cuba in a historical context:

What did people talk about in the world at this moment?

about people, about countries and imaginary animals,  
about Algeria,  
about France,  
about America,  
about space,

about time,  
about the Congo,  
about Laos,  
about Africa,

and the forms that they took in the second half of this century, both violence and prayer.

The Apocalypse was also written. It was the most expensive book in the whole world.

It was then that people in the world began also to talk about Cuba.<sup>8</sup>

Against this poetic backdrop, in which the revolutions and acquired independence of small nations like Cuba were related with the Apocalypse, the long section on Castro is introduced. In this final section the images portray an angry Castro, a humorous Castro, a dedicated and candid Castro, whose voice replaces Marker's as spoken text. The shift informs the technique of all of the later SLON films. Marker's peep-hole camera pulls back; his own voice goes mute and anonymous. The camera as surgical tool gives way to the camera as archive instrument, preserving Castro's uninterrupted speech for posterity.

On a formal level, of course, Marker's predilection for still photographs is the middle step in the process from a camera that calls attention to itself and that raises questions to be resolved in the editing and in the text to a fixed-spectator camera of little movement, long takes and shallow depth of field. The camera, then, obeys the text, which for the first time, issues from the subject. In fact, there are no “native speakers” in either *Lettre de Sibérie* or “L'Amérique rêve.” In those two film projects, Marker's own narration structures what, otherwise, is a silent film! And in *Cuba Sí* the long recitative which serves as a transition device between Marker's Cuba and Castro's (ironic in that it is expressed totally in Castro's face and hands) is Marker's approximation of the rhythms and repetitions in Castro's speeches.

What looks like a total about-face in Chris Marker's method is, in fact, a complete merger of theory and practice, both predicated on the idea of collective film-making toward a political purpose. The anonymity he has exhibited in sharing his resources and know-how and influence with factory workers, in “giving it all away,” finds its parallel anonymity in the SLON films,

in which the austerity in style allows a Medvedkin or a Castro to emerge, as though from the shadows, perhaps more fully than they could in person, certainly more fully and more forcefully than they have in any other media portraits.

The so-called sixth face of the Pentagon in *La Sixième Face du Pentagone* refers to the "people," rendering unto the thousands who took part in the peace march on Washington the status of an "estate," a collective power which in Marker's vision had enough impact on Richard Nixon to turn the Vietnam War around. On the surface, of course, Marker couldn't have been further from the original scenario for "L'Amérique rêve." No suggested mythology, no recourse to folklore, no urbane study of the off-beat. Marker and Reichenbach have fixed their vision on one finite historical moment. Marker's pattern in "L'Amérique rêve" of moving from the quaint and inexplicably particular (the Siamese-twin contest, the prison-farm rodeo) to the broom-sweep generalization gives way in *La Sixième Face du Pentagone* to a kind of "March of Time" format (but non-condensed, more shown than narrated, more found than staged). The Marker-Reichenbach film exists as a kind of corrective for the abridged and edited versions of the peace march on our own TV networks, the only other visual record we have, just as the *ciné-tracts* of 1968 provided an "alternate" news format from that provided by the self-censored Gaullist television news. In the original sense in which the French first defined "documentary," the Marker-Reichenbach film is more document than film, more historical moment-preserved than exposition of aesthetic possibilities (even though critics of the film pointed out that the marchers were definitely shown from a stance of sympathy, while the police and the president seem locked in their own power).

*The Battle of the 10,000,000* is a docu-text in the same vein, although more direct, because it comes to focus on one person—Castro. Here Marker operates within a dialectic of two different Castro speeches, one made prior to the *zafra* (sugar-crop harvest), in which Castro reveals the high stakes for the Cuban economy, and the other made on the 26th of July, 1970, in which Castro acknowledges the failure of the *zafra* and attempts an analysis of the reasons for the failure.

The rigor with which Marker undertakes his own dialectic of analysis/preserved document is underscored by Jacques Demeure:

But with a style purified by a severity which he has never before pushed to this extent. Of those brilliant effects of the past, there remains scarcely none except for a brief evocation (using a reverse angle shot) of what might be that conversation between Lenin and Castro which one Cuban dreams of, and some formulas which are meant to be more striking than seductive. Austerity predominates, in perfect harmony with the country described by the film.<sup>9</sup>

And yet, within the confines of the two Castro speeches, Marker finds time to attack America and cast doubt upon the Soviet influence in Cuba. But, contrary to his past experience, his wit in this film informs and fleshes out concrete current events of the time. Slogans on the walls suggest parallels between Cuba and Vietnam, since the United States had blockaded both countries. The Statue of Liberty is shown with devil's horns around her head. And animation introduces the topic of US intervention: Clark Kent changes into Superman costume, a prelude to announcing that two fishing boats had been captured. Castro's on-going speech is intercut with shots of the boats in the Cuban harbor. The shot of the harbor reinforces the fish-imagery with which the Cubans view the Americans—"barracuda" and "man-eating shark"—denoting the dangerous waters between the two countries. Finally, Nixon is burned in effigy, a comment both on the present intervention and a past intervention: Nixon's visit to Batista in 1955. The effigy image of Nixon, then, brings us full-circle, in terms of animation, to the Clark Kent/Superman image which introduced the topic.

And within Marker's dialectical process, this intervention is contrasted with, and offset by, another form of intervention: 60,000 Cubans donating blood to the Peruvian earthquake victims, a concrete example of solidarity among emerging nations, with the donation of blood to be understood figuratively as well as literally.

Thematically, the film would appear to be simple, perhaps overly so: Castro urges a record sugar crop, since Cuba is a one-crop economy; they have a record crop, but it's not enough; Castro admits to failure and posits the reasons for the failure. The ideal, as expressed by Castro,

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is simple enough: "When in this country not a single man will have to cut the cane with a machete we will have accomplished something . . . we will have transformed the work of an animal into really humane work." But the realities are very complex, especially in the irony that moving from the machete to advanced technology makes for "really humane work," and especially in the difficulties in needing a record crop of the only crop available for the economy to stay afloat, while needing at the same time to diversify and support other economic alternatives (among them, tourism!).

Marker's and Mayoux's musical sound track emphasizes the complexity of the problem by moving from the classical music of Castro's first speech prior to the *zafra* to the Beatles and "Golden Slumbers" for the last speech, both of them serving as counterpoint (since they are not "represented" visually) with the songs and chanting of the Cuban people between the speeches, which are represented, both visually and aurally.

Structurally speaking, the film is fascinating in terms of the progression of the film *qua* film(s) and the exploration of the role of the media in the film. Marker and Mayoux begin with Castro's speech of hope for the *zafra*, but it is a "boxed" speech, an excerpt from television, a nice formal touch for showing the past-ness of the speech. In the "middle" of the film, Castro moves from the signs of "No Hay" to the agit-prop films of Santiago Alvarez (also the cameraperson for *Battle*) and the Noticieros del ICAIC (Instituto Cubano de Artes e Industrias Cinematográficas), creating a dialectic between the inner films and the outer film which encases them. While serving as cameraperson for Marker and Mayoux and the SLON group, Alvarez also made agit-prop films during the time of the *zafra*, including *No Hay* (on rationing) and *Despegue a las 18*. The contrast is striking. While Alvarez and his group depicted the *zafra* in heroic and lyrical terms, Marker and the SLON group show their opposite (the Alvarez clips within their film), while, for their own part, encouraging an austerity in form, didacticism, clarity, a refusal of lyricism.

The third stage in the dialectic of film form under scrutiny (that is, which form or forms most appropriately convey the subject?) is the brief



BATTLE OF THE TEN MILLION: *Fidel Castro*

reverse-angle shot, stemming from a "dream" of a Cuban citizen and reproducing what can never be reproduced: a dialogue between Castro and Lenin. Again, the refusal of lyricism is evident. The enormous place that dreams occupied in Marker's former vision is here reduced to the reverse-angle shot, which creates a double refusal: refusal of dreams and wished-for linkages with the past when Castro's final speech speaks to the present and future and refusal of the dream/imaginary in terms of film form.

The final shot-sequence of Castro speaking directly to the camera must be understood, then, as the most appropriate form for the film *after* all other forms have been shown and eliminated. This final speech contrasts sharply with (1) the earlier televised *excerpt*, in that, this time, the speech is reproduced in its entirety and without any TV lines to blur the image; (2) with the agit-prop films of Santiago Alvarez and the newsreels of the ICAIC, in that these documents, by their emphasis on the "heroic" struggle, cannot admit any failure, while Castro's speech is *all about* failure; and (3) with the reverse-angle shot of Castro and Lenin, in that Castro's final speech seeks no justification for the failure of the *zafra* in dreams or in Lenin, and, quite the contrary, suggests the need to choose one's friends carefully, a suggestion of Cuban independence from their Soviet patrons. Castro even admits: "The imperialists are right in their critique but wrong in urging the path of counter-revolution."

Castro's candor, his admission of failure and self-criticism provide the dialectic on the spoken sound track which Marker and Mayoux duplicate in the making of the film. The two dialectics converge in the final speech, in the long take that

lets the subject assume the totality of the film apparatus, where the camera is fixed (transferring all emphasis onto the subject) and where the sound of the pro-filmic event—the speech—is the sound of the film.

*Le Train en marche*, a dialectical reassessment of *Lettre de Sibérie*, is probably the most complex of the SLON films in terms of structure, because it involves not only films within the film (the agit-prop films) but also a film outside of the film (Medvedkin's *Happiness*). Marker's film not only revives the Medvedkin film but also the entire process of the mobile film-train and the function it played in 1931 and 1932: to take film to the people, to show the people at work, to let them analyze their own production failures by means of the film, and to show them filmed comparisons with other workers and other factories. The SLON film not only attempts to rewrite history, emphasizing Medvedkin's role and that of the *ciné-trains* in light of the existing "history" of Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Dziga-Vertov, but it also serves as the basis for the formation of a working collective in the present, the French Medvedkin Group.

The SLON film assumes the symbolism of that time to accomplish its analysis. Marker quotes Lenin: "Of all the arts cinema is the most important . . ." His own title follows: "First the eye . . ." The symbolism of the eye comes from Eisenstein's *Strike* (1924). A still photograph of Eisenstein follows the title and reinforces the allusion. Only Marker's corrective reads: "Eisenstein brought it all. Medvedkin saw it all."

The train becomes the symbol of the revolution, following Lenin's directive. Literary quotes



LETTRE DE SIBERIE

and murals adorn the sides of the trains. "The image was sung:" Marker moves from a still photo of a phonograph to a close-up of a "real" phonograph, the voice of Lenin on it. Marker's following title: "And still the eye . . ." But the corresponding image is of Stalin and the narration that follows informs us: "Dziga-Vertov found the camera eye more perfect than the human eye."

In the space of a few brief shots and comments, Marker's film suggests the dialectic of the film-makers and the politicians, and the struggles between them. Beginning with Lenin, Marker moves to Eisenstein and Trotsky, then to Dziga-Vertov and Stalin, setting up a polar opposition between Eisenstein's invented behavioral montages and Dziga-Vertov's "found" subjects, corresponding to the oppositions between Trotsky's progressive tendencies and Stalin's hard-line pragmatics.

The SLON film would have Medvedkin as the inheritors of Lenin's directive for the cinema in terms of revolutionary activity. The choice of Medvedkin is a natural one, since Medvedkin, like Marker, gave up "personal" film-making, film-making of *auteur*-ship, to film the people and give film away to the people. As Marker states in the film: "The authors of a film are not just the film-makers or cameraman but the people who figure in the film."<sup>10</sup>

And, even though most of the agit-prop films are not lost, the SLON film is a historical reminder of their existence, and the creation of the French Medvedkin Group is a restoration of Medvedkin's film activity, if not his films. *Le Train en marche* is, then, a film in two sections. The first section discusses film "history" and details the available data and the methodology



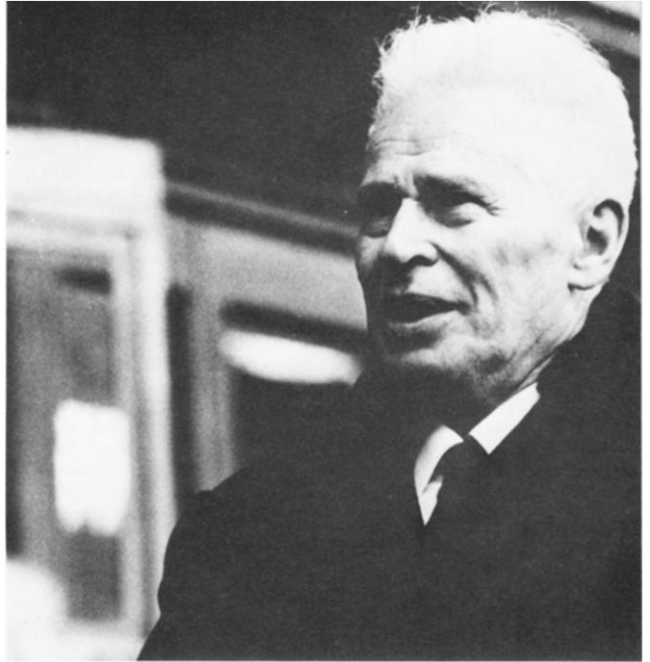
◀ LE TRAIN EN MARCHE



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(provided by Medvedkin) informing the *ciné-trains*. The second section, like the second section of *La Bataille des dix millions*, is an interview with the man whose spirit propels the first section. Medvedkin is interviewed in a train station. He talks about the *ciné-trains* and he talks about *Happiness*, but the image and the final word come from Marker. This train station is in Paris, and the stopped train behind Medvedkin is a modern one, one that has nothing to do with factory workers or cinema. But Marker's final comment re-proposes the synthesis in the dialectic of opposites (Medvedkin as an old man vs. the modern French train, the only "reconciliation" between them being the *ciné-train*) when he says: "The biggest mistake of all would be to believe that it (the *ciné-train*) has come to a halt."

Chris Marker's SLON films represent a radical point of departure (and commitment) in political film-making. They serve not only as historical correctives for distorted media portrayals (including no portrayals at all) of the Pentagon march, Castro's Cuba and Medvedkin's *ciné-trains*, but also as internal self-criticism of Marker's earlier depictions of America, Cuba and Russia. Marker has always operated outside of the normal production and distribution systems, but, at least in the earlier documentaries, critics and exhibitors could point to the single author, to stylistic flourishes, to wit and humor rendering the satire palpable even for those being satirized. But the new Marker rejects both the authorship and the stylistic indulgences. His "person" has been effectively effaced both inside and outside of the



*Alexander Medvedkin, interviewed in the contemporary Paris train station.*

collective films. Austere in their style, more document than film, and still not feature-length, the SLON films have barely been written about, let alone shown. Marker is making films about and for his subjects, for committed (and restricted) audiences that can see the films outside of the normal distribution system, that can use the films for internal analysis and that can become film-makers themselves. This kind of film, the film that gives film physically away to the spectator, would seem to me to be the only and ultimate goal of any political film-maker.

## NOTES

1. Godard and Gorin actively encouraged the equation between the Dziga-Vertov Group and political activity in France through numerous pronouncements and interviews, none of which show much solidarity with, or indeed mention of, other political film-collectives. Indeed, of all intellectuals and film technicians, the Dziga-Vertov Group members never made any attempt to open up their internal process to workers and non-film-makers, which set up the basic contradiction that eventually split the Group: they were intellectuals making films that praised workers and criticized intellectuals, but which were seen by and large by intellectuals, not workers.
2. The *ciné-tracts*, on-the-street day-to-day newsreels to counter-balance the "news" of the Gaullist press and television, were a very direct means of opposition, not only to

the established media, but also (1) to the "firing" of Henri Langlois at the Cinémathèque and (2) to the Cannes Film Festival, which was seen at that time as promoting bourgeois films. The sad thing about the *ciné-tracts* is that they were so short-lived.

3. Marker's activity was directly responsible for the formation of two collectives and indirectly inspired two others. The two directly formed through his interventions were the French-Medvedkin Group, which split off from SLON after the filming of *Le Train en marche* and another collective in Besançon, which resulted from a SLON film made there about a factory strike. In addition, Marker's *ciné-tract* activity seems to have been resumed in the print medium by way of two series of short bulletins on current events put out by SLON—*Nouvelle*

*Société* and *On vous parle*. I have also learned that SLON has changed its name to ISKRA, although I can't find any printed material to support this information.

4. The literal title of the Medvedkin film was *Styazhateli* (*Snatchers*). Made in 1934, it was quite a daring film at the time for its treatment of collective farming, which was an almost forbidden subject in the restrictive orthodoxy of Stalin's socialist realism.

5. Bazin's quote appears on the jacket of Chris Marker's *Commentaires I* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1961).

6. The complete texts for *Les Statues meurent aussi*, *Di-manche à Pékin*, *Lettre de Sibérie*, "L'Amérique rêve," *Description d'un combat* and *Cuba Sí* are available in *Commentaires I*. *Le Mystère Koumiko*, "Soy Mexico" and "Si j'avais quatre dromadaires" are available in *Commentaires II* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967). "Soy Mexico," itself an unfinished project, is a "re-make" of Eisenstein's unfinished *Que Viva Mexico* (1931). In fact, Eisenstein is the last and most effective "witness" in a list that includes Cortez, an

anonymous worker, Maximillian and Emiliano Zapata in the Marker film project.

7. It was during the mid-sixties that Marker and Jean Rouch were critically touted as the pioneers of *cinéma vérité*, a term which has yet to be defined satisfactorily and which Marker, himself, disdains.

8. For a detailed discussion of all of Marker's early documentaries, see my *The Theory and Practice of the Ciné-Roman* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), pp. 170-190.

9. Jacques Demeure, "Sugar Cane, Fashion and Revolution (*The Battle of the Ten Million Tons*)," *Positif* (December 1970) translated by Nadine Covert (April 1971) and reproduced by New Yorker Films, which distributes both *La Bataille des dix millions* and *Le Train en marche* in 16mm in this country.

10. I find it difficult not to see in the SLON "history" of Soviet revolutionary film a justification for Medvedkin and SLON with a slight note of attack, not so much on Dziga-Vertov himself, but on the French Dziga-Vertov Group and Godard-Gorin as *authors*.

## Reviews

### NEA

Director: Nelly Kaplan. Screenplay: Nelly Kaplan and Jean Chapot. Cinematography: Andreas Winding. Producer: André Genovès.

*Nea*, directed by Nelly Kaplan, is an exquisitely controlled ironic fairy tale slowly unfolding into a mature, intelligent, and playful parable about what it is that many self-realizing, loving women have such trouble getting from a man these days—recognition that romantic love is valuable, honorable, thrilling, and not to be debased.

The controlling narrative and textural characteristics suggest that in this film, reality is to be seen as the mutual creation of: (1) self-conscious fictionalizing, (2) a set of givens ("The force of attraction is in proportion to the dictates of fate," an epigraph tells us), and (3) certain strongly held beliefs. Involving fictions within fictions and worlds within worlds, the film does not try to naturalize its material; rather, the discourse as a whole makes the delicate assertion that even though romantic love may be a dream, such fantasy recuperates and preserves important human values—therefore, it is worth trying to live out. The film's strategy is to transform its basic story with subtle self-reflexiveness and ironically altered

fairy-tale elements so that the viewer may several times note with surprise that this movie is no longer what it seemed to be, has subtly shifted tone and resonance to reveal an unexpected narrative, epistemological, and moral sophistication.

The plot at first seems to offer a univocal story about Sybil (played by Ann Zacharias), a 16-year-old virgin (*Nea*: fem. of *neo* or *new*) with a talent for writing romantic, French-style philosophical pornography. Finally discovered by a handsome bookseller/editor (Axel, played by Sami Frey) whose shelves she's been steadily denuding without benefit of payment, she agrees to finish a manuscript that he will publish (for the enhancement of both art and commerce). After a while, Sybil realizes that to get past her writer's block she must make love with a flesh-and-blood man—who but handsome Axel. Despite his initial reluctance, things are wonderful between them, but to protect her anonymity, they agree not to see each other "till the snow melts from the chapel roof." The book becomes a terrific success and Sybil waits for the change of the seasons. Axel, however, does no lonesome pining. When, in her habitual investigative voyeurism, Sybil discovers that he's spreading joy all over Geneva, she becomes enraged and plans a fake rape scene